

The Carolingian Renaissance and Its Contribution to Education: Curriculum Reform, Latin Standardization, and the Linguistic Consequences of the Reforms

Emmanouil Gazilian¹, Marina Stavroula Chousou²

¹School Principal, 2nd General Lyceum of Ilioupolis, Gardiki 1, Ilioupoli, Attica, Greece

²Chemistry Education Teacher, 14th Lyceum of Athens, Sikelias 7, Athens, Attica, Greece

Abstract - The Carolingian Renaissance is commonly regarded as a revival of learning, yet its educational significance and linguistic consequences remain contested. This study examines the contribution of the Carolingian Renaissance to education, focusing on three central areas: curriculum reform, the standardization of Latin and its script, and the preservation of manuscripts. It draws on the scholarship of McKitterick, Contreni, Wright and others to show that educational reform was closely tied to the practical administration of the Frankish realm as well as to religious devotion. Charlemagne's initiatives, carried out by scholars such as Alcuin of York, led to the founding of schools, a unified curriculum based on the trivium and quadrivium, teaching manuals, and the development of Carolingian minuscule. The large-scale copying of manuscripts preserved many classical and ecclesiastical works. The study also assesses the unintended linguistic consequences of the reforms, arguing that the requirement to pronounce Latin as written distanced the language of the schools and church from everyday speech, made sermons incomprehensible to Romance-speaking audiences, and ultimately encouraged the development of separate orthographic systems for vernacular languages. In conclusion, the Renaissance's benefits were largely confined to a small circle of court scholars and clerics, while its most durable legacy lay in the preservation of texts, the standardization of script, and the transformation of the relationship between written and spoken language.

Key Words: *Carolingian minuscule, Carolingian Renaissance, curriculum reform, education, Latin standardization*



1. INTRODUCTION

The Carolingian Renaissance is often described as a revival of learning, but its significance lies less in a handful of brilliant scholars than in the attempt to build a functioning culture of literacy across the Frankish kingdoms. McKitterick (1989) shows that written texts in Carolingian society were not confined to a clerical elite. They were also used in lay society, in government and administration, and in ordinary legal transactions. Seen this way, educational reform was tied to the practical running of the realm as well as to religious devotion, and the scholarship that followed has treated schooling, the copying of books and the shaping of a shared literary culture as closely connected subjects (Contreni, 1995).

Despite this attention, the educational achievement of the period remains difficult to define. Contreni (2014) approaches Carolingian education as a program of learning oriented toward religious and moral ends, which raises the question of how far its reforms served intellectual life and how far they served other purposes. The relationship between the language of the schools and the language of everyday communication is a further problem, since a standard of written Latin that was more precise could also have made texts less accessible to those who heard them. Studies that focus only on the achievements of the court scholars therefore risk overlooking the educational and linguistic consequences of the reforms. In that context, the aim of this study is to examine the contribution of the Carolingian Renaissance to education, focusing on curriculum reform, the standardization of Latin and its script, and the preservation of manuscripts. It also aims to assess the linguistic consequences of these reforms.

2. MAIN TEXT

The Carolingian Renaissance manifested mainly during the time when the Carolingian rulers Charlemagne and Louis the Pious were in power. This particular Renaissance was supported by the scholars of the Carolingian court, and especially Alcuin of York (Durkheim, 2014; Trompf, 1973).

Examining the impact of the Carolingian Renaissance on education, it is necessary to note that it initially appeared precisely as a consequence of the educational gaps that existed during that period. The gap in Latin learning in Western Europe during the 8th century caused a multitude of

problems for the Carolingian rulers, as it resulted in a reduction in the number of those who could offer their services as court scribes in regions where Latin held a central role. The fact that not all clergymen possessed the ability to read the Vulgate Bible caused even greater concern to certain rulers. An additional issue that can be pointed out is that the Latin of the late Western Roman Empire exhibited notable differentiation into local dialects, which also constituted the starting point of the Romance languages that followed. These dialects were not easily understood and hindered communication between scholars from different regions of Europe (Johnson, 2022).

In order to address this situation, Charlemagne proceeded to issue an order for the creation of schools through a capitulary known as the Charter of Modern Thought, which was issued in 787. An important element of his reform plan was the arrival at his court of many of the leading scholars of the period. Among the first to be invited were several Italians. In particular, these were Peter of Pisa, who taught Latin to Charlemagne from 776 to approximately 790, and Paulinus of Aquileia, from 776 to 787, whom Charlemagne appointed as patriarch of Aquileia in 787. The Lombard Paul the Deacon was transferred to the court in 782 and remained there until 787, when Charles appointed him abbot of Montecassino. Theodulf of Orleans was a Spanish Goth who served at the court from 782 to 797, when he assumed the position of bishop of Orleans, and was in friendly rivalry with Alcuin of York, the head of Charlemagne's scholars, regarding the standardization of the Vulgate. Alcuin was a monk and deacon, who served as head of the Palace School from 782 to 796, with the exception of the years 790 to 793, during which he returned to England. After 796, he continued his scholarly work as abbot of the Monastery of Saint Martin in Tours. Among those who followed Alcuin to Gaul in order to reach the Frankish court was Joseph Scotus, an Irishman who left certain original biblical commentaries. After this first generation of non-Frankish scholars, their Frankish students, such as Angilbert, left their own mark. In addition, the courts that followed, those of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald, were composed of similar groups of scholars, several of whom originated from Ireland. The Irish monk Dicuil was present at the first court, while the most famous Irishman John Scotus Eriugena was present at the second and assumed the position of head of the palace school at Aachen (Durkheim, 2014; Johnson, 2022).

One of the first of these efforts was the compilation of a unified curriculum, intended for the schools that had just been founded. This effort was led by Alcuin, who was assigned the composition of teaching manuals, the compilation of word lists, and the establishment of the trivium and the quadrivium as the basis of education (Cantor, 1993).

A further contribution of this period was the development of the Carolingian miniature, a small book that was initially used in the monasteries of Corbie and Tours and contributed to the spread of the use of lowercase letters. At the same time, a standardized form of the Latin language developed, which allowed the creation of new words while simultaneously preserving the grammatical rules of classical Latin. This Medieval Latin functioned as the commonly accepted language of the scholars of the era and gave administrative officials and travelers the ability to communicate between different regions of the European continent (Johnson, 2022).

It is estimated that over 100,000 manuscripts were produced in Carolingian workshops during the 9th century, of which approximately 6,000 to 7,000 survived. The Carolingians created the oldest surviving copies of works by figures such as Cicero, Horace, Statius, Lucretius, Terence, Julius Caesar, and Boethius. In the Latin West, copies of the texts of these authors are not found during the 7th and 8th centuries (Buringh, 2010).

Examining its contribution to education, one can attribute to the Carolingian Renaissance the responsibility for the modern pronunciation of ecclesiastical Latin. Until that time there was no conceptual distinction between Latin and Romance languages, as the former was simply considered the written form of the latter. For example, in early medieval Spain the word "century", which would have been pronounced */sjeglo/, was correctly written <saeculum>, as was the case for the greater part of a millennium. The scribe would not have pronounced <saeculum> as /sækulum/, just as a present-day English speaker would not pronounce <knight> as */knɪxt/ (Wright, 1982).

However, those who were not native speakers of Latin, such as those of Irish origin, rather used some different pronunciation, evidently attempting to render each word orally on the basis of its spelling. The Carolingian Renaissance in France resulted in this artificial pronunciation being introduced for the first time among native speakers as well. For example, the word <viridarium> "orchard" would not be pronounced like the related Old French word */verdʒjær/, since from then on it had to be pronounced exactly as it was written, that is, with all six syllables, as /viridiarium/ (Wright, 1982).

These significant changes resulted in Latin sermons becoming completely incomprehensible to the broad Romance-speaking audience, a fact that led officials just a few years later, at the Council of Tours, to instruct priests to deliver sermons in the previous manner, realizing that the above initiative could not be applied in practice, causing serious problems and difficulties (Wright, 1982).

As it was no longer clear whether a text should be delivered as Latin or as a Romance language, native speakers of Germanic faced serious obstacles when attempting to read words with Latin spelling following the Romance pronunciation. Because of this, many efforts were made in France to shape a new kind of orthography. Among the first relevant examples, excerpts from the Sequence of Saint Eulalia and the Oaths of Strasbourg can be mentioned. A spread of the "correct" Latin pronunciation from France to other Romance-speaking points was in fact observed, within the framework of the Carolingian Reform. Thus, local communities ultimately found themselves in need of developing separate orthographic systems for their own popular spoken languages as well, something that led to the literary phase of Medieval Romance. However, the spread of writing in Romance was not significant until the 12th century AD (Wright, 1982).

In general terms, the results of this cultural renaissance were to a great extent confined within a small group of court philologists. As Contreni (1984, p. 59) argued, the Renaissance "had a spectacular impact on education and culture in Francia, a questionable impact on artistic endeavors, and an immeasurable impact on what mattered most to the Carolingians, the moral renewal of society." The secular and ecclesiastical leaders of the Carolingian Renaissance undertook significant actions in order to write better Latin, to copy and preserve classical and ecclesiastical texts, as well as to develop a more legible, classicizing script, with a clear distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters. These changes contributed greatly to the formation of early modern Italian writing. In addition, thanks to this Renaissance, rational ideas were applied to social issues after several centuries, as the effects on education through the adoption of a common language and a common style of writing made communication between different regions of the European continent feasible..

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Carolingian Renaissance made a lasting contribution to education, even though its immediate reach was limited. Charlemagne's initiatives, carried out by scholars such as Alcuin, created schools and a unified curriculum built on the trivium and the quadrivium. They also produced teaching manuals and standardized the Latin used for writing and instruction. The Carolingian minuscule, with its clear distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters, made texts more legible and became the basis for later European scripts. The large-scale copying of manuscripts in Carolingian workshops preserved works of classical and ecclesiastical authors that would otherwise have been lost, since the oldest surviving copies of many of them come from this

period. Medieval Latin also became a shared language of scholarship and administration, allowing communication across the different regions of Europe.

The reforms also had significant linguistic consequences that were not intended. By requiring that Latin be pronounced as it was written, they introduced an artificial pronunciation that distanced the language of the schools and the church from everyday speech. Latin and the emerging Romance languages were thereby recognized as distinct, and sermons became incomprehensible to Romance-speaking audiences. The Council of Tours had to reverse the policy in this respect, which shows that the reforms could not be applied in practice as designed. In the long run, this rupture encouraged the development of separate orthographic systems for the vernacular languages and paved the way for a written Romance literature, although its wide diffusion came only in the 12th century. Therefore, the Carolingian Renaissance had a significant effect on education and written culture, but its benefits were confined largely to a small circle of court scholars and clerics. Its most durable legacy was in the preservation of texts, the standardization of script and the transformation of the relationship between written and spoken language.



REFERENCES

- Buringh, E. (2010). *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West*. Brill Publishers.
- Cantor, N.F. (1993). *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: a completely revised and expanded edition of Medieval history, the life and death of a civilization*. Harper Collins.
- Contreni, J.G. (1984). *"The Carolingian Renaissance", Renaissances before the Renaissance: cultural revivals of late antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Stanford University Press.
- Contreni, J. J. (1995). The Carolingian Renaissance: Education and literary culture. In R. McKitterick (Ed.), *The new Cambridge medieval history: Vol. 2. c. 700–c. 900* (pp. 709–757). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521362924.030>
- Contreni, J. J. (2014). Learning for God: Education in the Carolingian age. *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 24, 89–129.
- Durkheim, E. (2014). *The Evolution of Educational Thought*. Alexandria Publications.
- Johnson, W. G. (2022). Carolingian Renaissance. ABC-CLIO.
- McKitterick, R. (1989). *The Carolingians and the written word*. Cambridge University Press.
- Trompf, G. W. (1973). The concept of the Carolingian Renaissance. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34(1), 3-26.
- Wright, R. (1982). *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France*. Francis Cairns.